

After Thai-Vietnam talks on Kampuchea

by Richard Katz

Both Vietnamese and Thai diplomats are now saying that a diplomatic logjam around the Kampuchean issue is beginning to be pried open. The June 9 talks in Bangkok between Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach and Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, according to diplomatic sources, made some progress in arranging a pullback of Vietnamese troops 30 kilometers from the Thai border with Kampuchea, in return for an understanding that the pullback would not be used to provide a buffer for the Khmer Rouge rebels.

Nearly 200,000 Vietnamese troops entered Kampuchea in January 1979 to help Heng Samrin kick out the Chinese-sponsored Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot, which had murdered 2-3 million Kampuchians during its three-year rule. Since then, Thailand and its friends in Southeast Asia have demanded the total withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and have fought for continued recognition of the Pol Pot regime and its thinly veiled successor—a tripartite “coalition” of the Khmer Rouge, of the much weaker forces of former Prince Sihanouk, and of former Prime Minister Son Sann—until a new government is selected under United Nations-run elections. A diplomatic standstill and sporadic fighting on the ground have prevailed up until the recent talks.

Though no one expects any early settlement or imminent dramatic announcements, the 90-minute talks between Thach and Siddhi have taken the first steps. A Thai Foreign Ministry statement labeled the talks “a favorable new beginning,” announcing that Siddhi has accepted in principle an invitation to Hanoi. Thach called the talks “successful” and “friendly,” and stressed to reporters, “now we will have dialogue and not confrontation.”

The immediate impetus for the talks was a proposal by Siddhi during the recent Thai election campaign that Vietnam withdraw its troops 30 kilometers from Kampuchea’s border with Thailand. Siddhi said this would provide a basis for further Thai-Vietnamese talks to resolve the Kampuchea issue as a whole. Given Siddhi’s previous intransigent stance against Vietnam, many Southeast Asians regarded the proposal as a propaganda ploy to put Vietnam on the spot. However, to the surprise of many, Vietnam quickly offered to send Thach to Thailand to discuss the idea.

Following the June 9 talks, Thach indicated that some progress had been made on arranging the pullback. In a June 12 interview with the Vietnam News Agency, Thach said

that the Vietnamese side would say no if the 30-kilometer pullback was presented as a precondition for any future talks. If, however, Thailand simply asked Vietnam to do this as part of good-faith efforts to resolve the conflict, then Vietnam would give the proposal “due consideration.” Thach said the “Thai side made known that this was not a precondition.”

According to diplomatic sources, Thach also let the Thais know that if its pullback were used as an opportunity to send the Khmer Rouge and its allies back into Kampuchea, then Vietnam’s troops would move right back up to the border. Although Thach did not insist upon an explicit quid pro quo, the Vietnamese let it be understood that they expected a matching concession, e.g., reduced arms funneling to the Khmer Rouge. These sources expected the Vietnamese to begin the pullback soon.

The diplomatic possibilities are aided by the accession of a new, broader-based government in Thailand. The prime minister, Prem Tinsulanond, remains the same, but his new government includes politicians less aligned with neighboring China, and more willing to make a settlement with Vietnam. These include former Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan and former Foreign Minister Pichai Rattakul. China has announced its intent to use a prolonged Kampuchean conflict to “bleed” Vietnam. In contrast, many Thais and some of Thailand’s partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are interested in ending the conflict if they can achieve what they believe to be a reasonable settlement. Thach had visited the Philippines just before he came to Thailand.

In an interview with *EIR* on the eve of the Thai-Vietnamese talks (see *EIR*, July 14), new Deputy Premier Pichai Rattakul said Thailand has to act in its own interests, not those of great powers around it. He said that he, along with Kriangsak, has been a “very severe critic” of Thailand’s previous hardline stance toward Vietnam, since he thinks it is impossible to “bleed” Vietnam, and that “being neighbors, we cannot afford to confront each other.” Pichai advocated immediate reopening of trade and economic relations with Vietnam, and told *EIR* he has already been talking with Vietnam’s Thach about the possibility of cooperation on hydroelectric-irrigation development for the Mekong River region.

The key to any future progress may lie with the United States. Interestingly enough, diplomatic sources say Vietnam believes that diplomatic efforts could be helped by strengthened U.S. links with the ASEAN countries. The Carter-Kissinger policy has been to subordinate U.S. policy in Asia to the effort to build up the “China card” as a substitute for U.S. strength in the region. However, if the United States desires to restore its direct presence and its ties to its traditional friends—and if the United States recognizes its Southeast Asian friends’ fears of China—then, the Vietnamese are said to believe, the United States will not stand in the way of an accommodation between ASEAN and Vietnam.